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SUBJECT: LY ELECTION PREVIEW: TAICHUNG COUNTY

Classified By: AIT Director Douglas Paal, Reason: 1.4 (B/D)

¶11. (C) Summary: Spurred by Chen Shui-bian's 30,000-margin victory in Taichung County during the 2004 presidential election, the DPP expects to elect five of its six LY nominees there this December, up from the four seats it won in 2001. The KMT nominated its four incumbents and one newcomer, with four likely to win seats. PFP's sole nominee, incumbent Feng Ting-kuo, is expected to win reelection by capturing virtually all of the county's Mainlander vote. Colorful independent incumbent Yen Ching-piao is another iron-clad winner. Whether or not the DPP can duplicate the success it achieved in the presidential election will depend on the effectiveness of its vote allocation system versus the ability of KMT grassroot organizations to remain a force in voter mobilization. End Summary.

Weathervane of Taiwan Politics

¶12. (C) Eleven legislators represent Taichung County's population of 1.5 million in the Legislative Yuan (LY). During the 2004 presidential election, Chen Shui-bian targeted this historically Pan-Blue stronghold as a battleground, and by cultivating the faction leaders so important in Taichung politics, made significant inroads in the county. Hung Chao-nan, eighth term KMT Legislator from Taichung City, told AIT that Chen constantly visited the county during the presidential campaign. For his efforts, Chen won in Taichung by a margin of 30,000 plus votes, and the DPP now hopes to translate that victory into LY seats. Commenting on the significance of this locality, PFP Legislator and Spokesman Daniel Hwang (Yih-jiau) told AIT that Taichung County is a litmus test for "where the wind is blowing" in Taiwan party politics.

¶13. (C) Although 22 candidates have registered to contest the 11 seats, Taichung party officials across the political spectrum agreed that only 13 candidates are serious contenders. Chiu Tai-san, a veteran of Taichung local politics before being appointed Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) Senior Vice Chairman, assessed that only six incumbents are assured of victory -- two DPP, two KMT, PFP Feng Ting-kuo, and independent Yen Ching-piao. Three DPP nominees, three KMT nominees, and independent Yang Tien-sheng will battle for the remaining five seats.

DPP: Two incumbents, four newcomers

¶14. (C) In 2001 four of the five candidates nominated by the DPP won LY seats. The two DPP incumbents running for reelection -- Kuo Chun-ming and Chien Chao-tung -- are assured of victory this December. Although the other incumbents are not running (Chiu Tai-san left the LY for MAC in May 2004, and Lin Feng-hsi plans to run for Taichung County magistrate in 2005), each has anointed a stand-in -- Tsai Chi-chan was Chiu Tai-san's chief of staff while Wu

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Fu-gui is Lin Feng-hsi's protege.

¶15. (C) DPP Taichung County Chairman Sheng Kuo-jung is confident the DPP will not only retain its current four seats but also gain a fifth seat. Despite Chiu Tai-san's concern that Tsai is too much of a policy wonk and has not been able to connect with the voters, Sheng told AIT that Tsai is the strongest of all the DPP newcomers. Sheng then turned to what he called Wu Fu-gui's many strengths -- he is a former National Assembly member, his brother is an incumbent county councilor, and Lin Feng-hsi's base is particularly strong and loyal. Sheng told AIT that a third candidate, Hsieh Hsin-nee, will win the break-through fifth seat for the DPP. He pointed out that although Hsieh is an outsider from Tainan she previously served as DPP Director of Social Development and is receiving strong endorsement and support from central headquarters.

¶16. (C) Of the DPP nominees, Liu Jui-lung is the one on the cusp. Sheng believes it is possible for the DPP to gain one but not two more seat than it did in 2001. Sheng said that new DPP voters who came over from the KMT during the presidential election are likely to return to their old voting habits in an LY election. Another problem, Sheng

explained to AIT, is the candidate himself. He said Liu is known primarily in the coastal towns, and has not sufficiently widened his appeal in the plain and mountain areas. Sheng also remarked that Liu is a poor campaigner. He said that so far the party has not made any decisions about Liu's campaign, or any decisions about voting allocation (pei-piao). When asked whether he thought the DPP over-nominated in Taichung County, Sheng told AIT that President Chen wanted to win a LY majority and urged the party to nominate aggressively in most counties.

KMT: Holding steady

17. (C) The KMT nominated five candidates to run in this year's election. Four are incumbents. Four-term superstar legislator Shyu Jong-shyong is by far the most popular legislator in Taichung if not in all of Taiwan. Shyu boosted to AIT that he does not need to campaign to win. The second most popular KMT incumbent, Yang Chiung-ying, is virtually unknown outside of Taichung. However, informed observers consistently rank her as one of the top three performers in the county. The same observers told AIT that incumbents Liu Chuan-chung and Chi Kuo-tung are likely to win reelection as well but their victories are not as secure.

18. (C) Although the KMT believes it has enough supporters to win five seats, the tangled legacy of the 2001 election may render that harder than it might first appear. In 2001, the KMT nominated six and won five seats. The winner of the fifth KMT seat in 2001 was Yang Wen-hsin. The KMT later revoked Yang's membership for repeatedly refusing to vote on legislation along party lines. To complicate things further, Yang Wen-hsin's father, Yang Tien-sheng, is running in his place this year. The family business, Everfortune (Chang-Yi) is reportedly in financial difficulty and Chiu Tai-san told AIT that the family sees winning a LY seat as vital to saving its future.

19. (C) To vie for votes that went to Yang in 2001, the KMT has nominated Chiang Lien-fu, the mayor of Taiping township. KMT County Chairman Lai Hsin-hsiung told AIT he is optimistic all five nominees will prevail and outlined a strategy based on geographical allocation of votes. Former DPP County Magistrate Liao Yang-lai agreed that the KMT has a chance to win five seats. PFP Taichung County Chief Lin Yao-hsin thought four KMT seats were more likely. DPP's Sheng told AIT that Chiang is known in the mountain areas but has had difficulty cultivating voters in the coastal and plain towns. Sheng also pointed out that Chiang was Yang Tien-sheng's protege so their supporter base will overlap.

KMT's Bad Reputation

110. (C) KMT has long relied on grassroots networks to mobilize supporters for rallies and other election activities. However, the post-March 20 street demonstrations in Taipei have taken a toll on the KMT LY election effort. DPP's Sheng said that the KMT grassroots organizations have not been very active this year because they are all exhausted from the March mobilization. In addition, those scenes of protesters attacking police and other public servants have alienated the conservative people from the Taichung countrysides. KMT's Shyu Jong-Shyong offered a similar assessment, telling AIT that he is the only KMT candidate who dares to identify himself as KMT member.

PFP: One Candidate for Mainlanders

111. (C) Banking on the 150,000 ethnic Mainlanders eligible to vote in Taichung County, the PFP in 2001 nominated four candidates (three men and a woman), expecting to elect at least three of them. Of the four candidates, three were ethnic Taiwanese while one was Mainlander. Only Feng Ting-kuo -- the Mainlander nominee -- was elected in 2001. This year as the sole PFP nominee, he is universally expected to win reelection. DPP's Sheng told AIT that Feng has a terrible reputation in Taichung but with access to almost the entire Mainlander vote, he is assured of victory.

TSU: Nomination folly

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112. (C) Wang Dai Chun-man, the sole TSU nominee in 2001, failed to win election by a mere 460 votes. She might have had a good chance to win this year if the TSU had not nominated two candidates. Everyone AIT interviewed agreed that TSU does not have enough supporters in Taichung to elect two candidates, and that by nominating two candidates, the party has jeopardized both of their chances to win. During his discussion with AIT, Wang's campaign director cursed TSU Chairman Huang Chu-wen, calling him a brainless rotten egg

(wan ba dan) for insisting on nominating two TSU candidates. A tireless campaigner, Wang told AIT that she canvasses for votes in traditional markets at 6:00 every morning and at night markets until late every evening. Nevertheless, she confessed that her chances are slim.

The Yen Ching-piao Lock

¶13. (C) Taichung County is represented in the legislature by one of the most famous gangsters in Taiwan. Rumored to have been involved in racketeering and other organized crimes, Yen Ching-piao is equally well known as the patron and chairman of Chenlan Temple, a powerful Matsu temple. He has served in the Taichung County Council and Taiwan Provincial Council. During his term as Taichung County Council Speaker, Yen was indicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison for murder and corruption. While still in jail, Yen decided to run for legislator as an independent -- sending his wife and son to campaign on his behalf. He won in December 2001 and was sworn in as a LY member in early 2002. No one in Taiwan has any doubt that Yen will prevail in his reelection effort. KMT County Chairman Lai told AIT that Yen does not have to get out of bed and he will win.

Hitman with a heart

¶14. (C) While no one can satisfactorily explain how a known gangster can win election in a county known for its conservative traditional values, DPP's Sheng offered the argument that most people do not feel personally threatened by Yen. Former DPP County Magistrate Liao Yang-lai explained that Yen has an image of being very diligent, offering excellent service to his community, and being filial to his parents.

¶15. (C) The more interesting question is whether Yen will vote with the Greens or Blues in the next LY session. In the past, because of his affiliation with James Soong through the provincial council, Yen sided with the Blues. Yen told AIT that he has never voted with the Pan-Green but the DPP government sometimes used his "legal problems" to pressure him to stay home. DPP's Sheng is confident that in the next session, most independent legislators will vote with the Pan-Green. Sheng said that Yen voted with the Pan-Blue in the past because he owed James Soong but pointed out that Yen has repaid his debt. MAC's Chiu made a similar point, "He does not care about national issues, so if we need his vote on a major bill, we will just build a road for him." A survey of the large number of new roads in Yen's hometown suggests that Yen has cooperated with the DPP more than once.

Comment: Change of political guards?

¶16. (C) With PFP Feng Ting-kuo and independent Yen Ching-piao definitely winning a seat each, the remaining nine seats will be split five-four between the DPP and the KMT. Most political observers agreed that the DPP over-nominated this year. Even DPP County Chairman Sheng admitted that DPP's Liu Jui-lung's campaign was "in danger." The KMT's chances for electing five candidates may hinge on the KMT's ability to counter the campaign of independent Yang Tien-sheng because their voter base overlaps. This LY election will also test the continued effectiveness of KMT grassroot organizations to mobilize voters and the KMT's relation with local factions (Septel will explore the impact of local factions and voting buying in Taiwan LY elections, looking particularly at Taichung County).

PAAL